



Femicide in Israel

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Abstract

Femicide is one kind of homicide that refers to the intentional murder of women because of their gender. The chapter provides an introduction to what femicide is and its status globally. Then it explains the state of femicide and the types of killings in Israel, including so-called honor killings among the Arab population in Israel. Next, it presents empirical data from the findings from a longitudinal study of femicide in Israel over a decade (2006–2015) and the 2020 and 2021 reports of the recently established Israel Observatory on Femicide (IOF), established in line with directives from the United Nations. Finally, it discusses the rise in femicide in Israel during COVID-19 and the lockdown and shows that there has been a reduction in the number of femicides committed in Israel in 2021 after the strict COVID regulations were relaxed.

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Femicide · Honor killings · Intimate partner killings · Israel Observatory on Femicide · Female geronticide · COVID-19

1 Introduction

Femicide is the intentional murder of women because they are women and while most intentional homicide victims are male, the majority of intimate partner or family-related homicides are female. When Diana Russell used the word “femicide” at the First International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels in March 1976, the primary goal was to raise political awareness that the violent death of women was a crime *per se* and should not be confused with or included in the gender-neutral term “homicide” (Radford and Russell 1992). To this day, in most countries, femicide statistics are still part of homicide data and hence is part of the problem of the way the social order legitimizes or even tolerates the killings of women because of their gender (Russell and Harnes 2001). Until recently, the phenomenon was “invisible” and hardly reported (Weil 2016a), but in the last eight years or so, femicide has managed to take a center stage.

The meaning and implications of femicide have changed over time. Initially, the term denoted a political intention but altered over time in line with changing political and social attitudes (Corradi et al. 2016; Grzyb, Naudi and Marcuello-Servós 2018). In 1992, in the first anthology published on femicide by Diana Russell, femicide developed a misogynistic character. Radford defined it as “the misogynous killing of women by men,” motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure, or a sense of ownership of women, thus to be investigated “. . . in the context of the overall oppression of women in a patriarchal society” (Radford 1992: 3). She pointed out that even if men are murdered more frequently than women, they “are rarely murdered simply because they are men” (Radford 1992: 10). Thus, femicide became associated with patriarchal societies, which are characterized by male dominance and female subordination (Radford 1992: 8).

According to the UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime), one in seven homicides are femicides. A total of 87,000 women were intentionally killed in 2017, the most recent year for which statistics are available (UNODC 2019). Nearly 60,000 women were killed by current intimate partners, former partners, or family members. Femicide is highest in Southeast Asia (58.8%), followed by high-income countries (41.2%), the Americas (40.5%), and Africa (40.1%). It is lower in the Western Pacific region (19.1%), lower- and middle-income European regions (20.0%), and the Eastern Mediterranean (14.4%). These statistics only report femicides from the UN member states and clearly underestimate the numbers of women killed since only officially reported data could be used. More than one-third of women killed globally are murdered by their partners, whom they would expect to trust.

Femicide can also be carried out by other family members, as in so-called honor killings, and they are typically carried out by partners, brothers, fathers, or even hired assassins to protect what is perceived as “shame” that has been brought upon the family by the victim. “Honor killings” are perpetrated because the woman is believed to have disrespected her family honor or brought shame to the family (Cooney 2014). In addition, femicides can be carried out by total strangers, although this scenario is rarer. In practice, the majority of victims of “honor killings” recognize their killers.

In the past decade, research and advocacy in the field of femicide have accelerated after a long period of dormancy, and domestic violence is monitored not only for partner abuse but also with a knowledge that violence against women can end in femicide. As a result, femicide has become a significant global challenge of a new order. Broad definitions of the phenomenon have been offered to associate femicide with various social phenomena, including witchcraft, dowry marriages, feticide, female genital mutilation, and human trafficking. The broadest of these is the Vienna Declaration on Femicide by the United Nations, which, in November 2012, recognized that:

femicide is the killing of women and girls because of their gender, which can take the form of, inter alia: 1) the murder of women as a result of domestic violence/intimate partner violence; 2) the torture and misogynist slaying of women 3) killing of women and girls in the name of ‘honor’; 4) targeted killing of women and girls in the context of armed conflict; 5) dowry-related killings of women and girls; 6) killing of women and girls because of their sexual orientation and gender identity; 7) the killing of aboriginal and indigenous women and girls because of their gender; 8) female infanticide and gender-based sex selection feticide; 9) genital mutilation related femicide; 10) accusations of witchcraft and 11) other femicides connected with gangs, organized crime, drug dealers, human trafficking, and the proliferation of small arms. (Laurent et al. 2013)

Data collection of global femicide statistics is in its infancy, and there is little consistency in its definition. Most countries count femicides from the age of 18 upward, but femicides are usually aggregated with homicide data. Some countries include the murder of young girls or adolescents, who may be women or mothers in their own cultures but may be underage in Western culture. A recent article comparing data collection for intimate partner killings shows so much missing information that it is hard to compare countries in Europe or even internationally (Stöckl et al. 2020). In many data systems, including official police statistics, court files, mortuary data, and media reports, the gender of the victim is not reported. There is also little knowledge of the victim-offender relationship in a situation where legal codes and statutes define partners differently, and there is no global agreement as to what constitutes femicide.

COVID-19 has impacted negatively upon domestic violence and femicide globally (Weil 2020a). In the early stages of coronavirus, countries reported a global increase in domestic violence, and femicide rates were on the rise, even in China, where statistics are sometimes unreliable. Women who were suffering both mental and physical violence at the hands of abusive partners inundated hotlines with

complaints. In France, domestic violence rose by one-third after lockdown, and Turkey saw a significant rise in the numbers who called into hotlines (*Deutsche Welle* 2020). In the United Kingdom, the National Domestic Abuse reported a rise of 25% in calls and online requests since lockdown (Kelly and Morgen 2020). Nearly three times as many women were murdered in March 2020 by men – 14 in all and two girls – than the average for the same period over the last decade, according to the UK Femicide Census (Smith 2020). Undoubtedly, additional cases of severe domestic violence remained unreported in situations where the only way to inform the authorities was by Internet or phone, and these may have been banned or confiscated by an abusive partner.

In 2020, the United Nations issued a report which noted, “. . . accompanying the crisis has been a spike in domestic violence reporting, at exactly the time that services, including rule of law, health and shelters, are being diverted to address the pandemic. With families isolated in their homes, children are also facing the rapid increase of online child abuse” (United Nations Women 2020). The closure of women’s shelters meant that some women and their children were thrown back to live with their assailants in frightening circumstances. With greater isolation, women were less in touch with social networks and support groups, thereby increasing their helplessness (Campbell 2020; Pentaraki and Speake 2020). Sometimes the situation ended tragically in femicide (Standish and Weil 2021); in other cases, desperate women and men committed suicide (Standish 2020).

This article will survey some of the literature on femicide, explain the state of femicide and the types of killings one can find in Israel, and present empirical data both from the findings from a longitudinal study of femicide over a decade (2006–2015) and from the 2020 and 2021 reports of the recently established Israel Observatory on Femicide (IOF). Finally, it will discuss the status of femicide during COVID-19 and its aftermath.

2 Femicide in Israel

In recent years, the murder of women by male intimate partners or family members has been evident in public discourse and has been featured prominently in the Israeli media. The term “femicide” is not a word in Hebrew, which is the national language of Israel; instead, the terms “murder of women” and “women’s murder” are used. Recently, there have been attempts by some feminists to introduce the foreign word “femicide” into Hebrew conversation to distinguish it from the random murder of women. The criminal code assigns no specific clause to femicide, and femicide murderers are charged with the general offense of homicide. Highly prevalent is the expression “murder about family honor” used in Hebrew (*rezach al kavod hamishpacha*) to indicate the murder of a female family member by a partner or other family member, predominantly among Israeli Arabs/Palestinians. A decolonial approach to femicide has been championed by some Israeli researchers in relation to these murders about family honor. According to Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002), the

criminal justice system, as well as the external sociocultural context, contributes to these criminal actions.

For example, in the Jordanian Penal Code, which is also applied in the West Bank, males receive reduced penalties and premeditated murder benefited from “mitigating circumstances,” and sometimes the males were exempted from punishment. In her research on the Palestinian Authority, Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002) discovered deliberate misinterpretations of the evidence and exoneration from blame for perpetrators. She attributes the legal discriminatory practices to external social and political pressures exerted on the judicial system, which had to deal with “more important” issues than honor crimes. In one case, the accomplice was set free, and the murderer was given a light sentence. She writes: “Serving a nation under a political banner becomes a license to kill females in order to preserve the honor of those who claim to have been part of the struggle” (2002: 597).

In a 2003 article, Shalhoub-Kevorkian pursues the idea that the discourse of colonial domination by the West has turned some practices, such as “honor killings,” into a symbol of resistance to the colonizers. She therefore proposes an expanded definition of femicide as:

...Femicide is the process leading to death and the creation of a situation in which it is impossible for the victim to ‘live.’ That is, femicide is all of the hegemonic masculine-social methods used to destroy females’ rights, ability potential and power to live safely. It is a form of abuse, threat, invasion and assault that degrades and subordinates women. It leads to continuous fear, frustration, isolation, exclusion and harm to females’ ability to control their personal intimate lives. (2003: 600–601)

Whether this definition forwards our understanding of femicide is doubtful. However, it contributes to comprehending that femicide is not a gender issue alone but also associated with politics. A recent survey of Israeli Arab attitudes toward “honor killings” has been carried out trying to understand the dilemma of Israeli Arabs torn between their traditional-patriarchal culture of origin and modern-liberal Western culture. The study which sampled 409 Arab Israelis (179 men and 230 women), with a mean age of 34.1, showed that 44% of the sample adopted a pattern of separation from Israeli society, 37.7% a pattern of integration, 9.5% of assimilation, and 8.8% a pattern of marginalization (Ne’eman-Haviv 2021).

Until 2012, apart from sporadic media-initiated projects, there had been no data available for femicide in Israel. In 2012, the Parliamentary Committee on Women’s Rights determined that femicide should be reported annually (Mizrachi-Simon 2015). However, only meager or no efforts were made to disseminate statistics about femicide outside the Knesset. In the police’s official report on violence for 2014, there were no less than nine different categories of murder, none of which related specifically to the murder of women (Weil et al. 2018: 121–122). Since 2015, and until the establishment of the private initiative to set up the IOF in 2020, there have been no systematic formal data on femicide in Israel. In November 2020, the Knesset produced a report on domestic violence and femicide based on data received from the police (Avgar 2020).

Academic research on femicide in Israel has identified killings among particular ethnic groups, such as Ethiopian immigrants (Weil 2016b) and Russian immigrants under the influence of alcohol (Sela-Shayovitz 2010a). Sela-Shayovitz has shown that femicides, often committed with a firearm, significantly increased during periods of warlike conflict and specifically among immigrants holding firearms during the second intifada (Sela-Shayovitz 2010b). Some femicides result in the suicide of the murderer, particularly among Ethiopian immigrants (Dayan 2018). The narratives of Ethiopian Jewish survivors of “failed femicides” have also been the object of research (Weil 2016b).

The Arab population constitutes approximately one-fifth of the total Israeli population of 8.8 million people in 2021. Prevalent among them are murders of women carried out by a husband, partner, brother, or even mother-in-law to restore the so-called honor of the family disgraced by the woman’s behavior. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Daher-Nashif examined femicides among women in the central Israeli town of Ramle (not situated in the Israeli-occupied territories or in the Palestinian Authority) and claimed that the crimes are not “honor crimes” but femicides “. . . empowered by the wider context of colonization and the increasing spatial segregation of Palestinian communities.” The study thus eschewed cultural explanations of femicide and turned to the ways in which politics, economic disadvantage, racism, and spatial segregation contribute in a colonial context to femicide. According to the authors, it is not “honor crimes” but the colonization of the Jewish state, which results in a disproportionate number of femicides among Palestinian women in this city (Shalhoub-Kervorkian and Daher-Nashif 2013).

In the past three years, there has been a rise in violence and crime in the Arab sector in Israel in general, with feuding families shooting in the streets; many Israeli Arabs are demanding that law enforcement be tightened in their cities. Over 100 homicides have been documented in 2021 alone up to early November. The vast majority of these homicides are murders of men, with only a few women killed in criminal acts; of these, only one or two were femicides in that the woman was killed because she was a woman or the result of an “honor killing.”

In a longitudinal study of the decade 2006–2015 (Weil and Keshet 2021), a total of 1256 adult homicides were perpetrated in Israel (Israeli Police 2016: 27). Of these, 145 cases of femicide were extracted, constituting 12% of all homicides in that decade. The average age of the femicide victim was 34.5, and the standard deviation was 18.9. Of the 145 femicide cases, 15 were murders of women over the age of 60, the age usually used in international data as “elderly,” or what we call “female geronticides” (Weil and Keshet 2021). Geronticide has been defined as “. . .the deliberate and systematic killing of the elderly solely because they are elderly” (Brogden 2001: 22). It is a universal phenomenon, and matricide, or the killing of a mother by her biological children, features prominently in mythology and ancient history, as well as in Freudian psychoanalysis (Jacobs 2008). Female geronticide occurs in higher numbers in some cultures than in others. In Japan, it was commonly known as “granny dumping” (Kawai et al. 2014). In the United States, matricide is still unusual, and female geronticide comprises less than 2% of all homicides (Heide and Frei 2010).

2.1 The IOF

In 2015, Dubravka Simonovic, the Special Rapporteur at the United Nations on violence against women and its causes and consequences, had called to establish a “femicide watch” or observatory on gender-related killings of women. The aim of this initiative is to focus on the prevention of femicide through the collection of comparable data on femicide rates at the national, regional, and global level, through an analysis of femicide cases by national multidisciplinary bodies, from a human rights perspective, in order to determine shortcomings within national laws and policies, including their lack of implementation, and to undertake preventive measures.

Simonovic further proclaimed:

I call all States to establish a ‘Femicide Watch’ or a ‘Gender-Related Killing of Women Watch’ and to publish on each 25 November–International Day on the Elimination of Violence against Women – the number of femicides or gender related killing of women per year, disaggregated by age and sex of the perpetrators, as well as the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim or victims. Information concerning the prosecution and punishment of perpetrators should also be collected and published. ... Most importantly, each case of gender-related killing should be carefully analyzed to identify any failure of protection in view of improving and developing further preventive measures. In the collection, analysis and publication of such data, States should co-operate with NGOs and independent human rights institutions working in this field, academia, victims’ representatives, as well as relevant international organizations and other stakeholders.

Such data should be made publicly available at the national level, while the UN and other organizations should ensure the global and regional publication of such data (OHCHR 2015).

On November 25, 2020, on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the IOF was established. The Israeli Observatory aims to be the official body providing qualitative and quantitative data on femicide in the country. It is a neutral body, which will be a national information center on femicide in Israel. It is run with a small philanthropic donation channeled through the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and is neither aligned with governmental departments nor political parties. The data is gathered from media and Internet reports, Google alerts, and reports from women’s organizations and cross-checked with other databases, parliamentary reports, and more. It should be pointed out that there is large variation between all these data, and the IOF collates it all in order to provide an authentic representation of femicide in Israel.

As with other femicide observatories or femicide watches, there are many methodological problems in the collection of quantitative and qualitative data on femicide (Stockl et al. 2020; Weil 2017). In some cases, a restraining order was in effect, and, in others, details were unavailable or missing. Sometimes, information only came to light years after a femicide had occurred, for example, an Israeli who was only recently found guilty of murdering his wife over 20 years ago as the DNA testing is getting more sophisticated.

The IOF does not count the numbers of women murdered in accidents murders or criminal cases. Femicide is restricted to age 18 and above to facilitate international comparisons, but data on femicides of younger girls are also collected. Upon its establishment, the IOF set up a website – www.israelfemicide.org – which is constantly updated and consulted by many. In its first year of existence, the IOF received letters of support from the president of the State of Israel, from the president of the Hebrew University, and from the Special Rapporteur at the UN on violence against women. It was featured in national and international media reports on femicide in Israel on television, social media, and newspapers. It deals with inquiries from NGOs, media, and governmental bodies as to the rate of femicide in Israel and its implications to aid members of the Knesset to promote legal action on femicide and to provide support to advocacy NGOs and feminist organizations.

The IOF became one of the first observatories to highlight the connection between extreme domestic violence and COVID. During 2020–2021, the IOF hosted conferences on zoom, in conjunction with the Israeli Council of Women’s Organizations in Israel and in collaboration with international organizations and observatories outside Israel. At the end of December 2020, the IOF released its first report, summarizing the characteristics of femicides in Israel in 2020. The report characterized 21 of the 25 murders of women committed in Israel during 2020 as femicides; one of these was a matricide in which a son killed his mother.

The average age of the victim was 39.6. The youngest victim was 19 years old, and the oldest was 66. The researchers at the IOF knew the identities of all the femicide victims, while the details of the killer were known in 81% of the cases; in the three cases where the name of the murderer had not been made public, it is known that he was an Israeli Arab. Of the 21 femicide victims, 12, or 57% of all femicide cases in 2020, were Israeli Arabs, six of whom were Bedouin, reflecting a disproportionate number of femicides in the Arab population in 2020. One victim was an immigrant from Ethiopia, and four were immigrants from former Soviet Union countries. In 17 of the 18 cases where police knew the perpetrator’s identity, the murderer was a male relative, and in 13 cases, it was the victim’s partner/spouse. The report also looked at the weapons used in the murders. Of the 20 cases where that information was available, seven women were stabbed, and six were shot to death. Two died due to blunt force trauma, two were strangled, two were beaten to death, and one victim was thrown to her death. Authorities had received previous complaints about domestic violence in only one-third of all the cases (Weil 2020b).

The numbers of femicides in 2021 (until November) are significantly lower than 2020. To date, 12 femicides have occurred in Israel, with an average of 0.8 women murdered per month; an additional 17-year-old girl was also killed, but, as mentioned above, she was not included in our official statistics. All the victims knew their perpetrators; all the perpetrators were of the same ethnic origin as the victims. Half were Jewish, and nearly half were Israeli Arabs except one case from the Hebrew Israelites. Half of the women were killed by their partners; one-third by their children, i.e., matricides; and 17% by their siblings; 42% of the women were killed by gunshot, 25% were stabbed with a knife, 25% were strangled, and 8% were killed by other means.

2.2 The Effect of COVID-19 on Femicide in Israel

COVID-19 has negatively impacted domestic violence and femicide in Israel, as in the rest of the world (Weil 2020b). Women, who were suffering both mental and physical violence at the hands of abusive partners, inundated hotlines in Israel with complaints. A systematic review of ten databases leading to all articles in peer-reviewed journals from January to May 2020 discussing domestic violence in the context of COVID-19 was conducted. The articles reviewed show that lockdown measures imposed by governments intensify perpetrators' power over survivors' lives, hence reinforcing gender inequality. In the same period, the rate of femicide increased in most countries in the world (Weil 2020a).

In March 2020, the month in which the coronavirus pandemic erupted in Israel in full force and when Israel imposed its first nationwide lockdown, five victims were claimed. There is no other month in 2020 with such high incidents of femicide. A year later, when COVID restrictions began to relax in Israel, there were no femicide victims in March 2021. Altogether, the situation in 2021 shows a large reduction in the number of femicides perpetrated, particularly in comparison with the previous year. In 2020, there were on an average 1.8 cases of femicide per month in Israel. Up to October 30, 2021, there are only 12 cases of femicides in 2021 over the age of 18; in a similar time frame in 2020, there were 19 cases.

There may be several explanations for this reduction. One may be the end to the harsh COVID-19 restrictions and the end of a strict lockdown. Another may be the unprecedented media coverage of femicides in newspapers, television, and the new media. In 2018, Sela-Shayovitz showed how the Israeli media could play a central role in the construction of femicide. She showed how news coverage played a significant part in shaping the denial of femicide in general and how the prevalent public discourse prevented individuals from taking responsibility (Sela-Shayovitz 2018). In an analysis of Israeli newspaper reports of femicide from 2004 to 2015, she demonstrated that different ethnic groups are covered differently, thereby perpetuating the structure of dominance, gender, and social class in Israel. Since 2020, there appears to have been a significant shift in the media coverage of this crime, largely due to activists and advocates and not due to governments, which have neither tackled the problem nor allocated funds to combat the problem. In 2021, a femicide survivor, the object of what was called a "failed femicide" (Weil 2016b), was widely featured in Israel television and media, along with her neighbor who helped save her. Together, they lit the torch on Israel's Independence Day, thereby giving prominence to the devastating phenomenon of extreme domestic violence (Braudo-Bahat 2021).

3 Conclusion

The definition and study of femicide are still ongoing. New issues occur as the world transforms and awareness is raised about this heinous crime. For example, there has been no case of transgender femicide in Israel, but this is documented in the United States and provides a challenge for redefining femicide. To date, femicide is not

recognized as a foremost human rights issue, although relevant to women everywhere. In Israel, strides have been taken recently to identify and prevent the phenomenon, but successive governments have not taken on the load, and, hence, this had to be implemented by private organizations and initiatives. The Israeli Observatory on Femicide is one example, and it strives to become the official organ that can provide data on the subject. It is significant that in the longitudinal study of femicide carried out from 2006 to 2015, the mean number of femicides per annum was 14.5, but during the lockdown and under the stress of COVID-19, that mean number increased to 21 cases in 2020. Nevertheless, in 2021, the number of femicides has been reduced, due to public awareness of the phenomenon and the relaxation of COVID restrictions.

4 Cross-References

- ▶ [Israel and Four Mothers Movement: Leaving Lebanon in Peace](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Harassment and Israel](#)
- ▶ [Women in the Military in Israel](#)

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